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Visual Voices in Participatory Communication

Arvind Singhal and Kanta Devi

IN 1973, while conducting a literacy project in a barrio of Lima, Peru, the noted Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (and his colleagues) asked people questions in Spanish, but requested the answers in photographs. When the question 'What is exploitation?' was asked, some people took photos of a landlord, grocer, or a policeman (Boal, 1979, p. 123). One child took a photo of a nail on a wall. It made no sense to adults, but other children were in strong agreement. The ensuing discussions showed that many young boys of that neighborhood worked in the shoe-shine business. Their clients were mainly in the city, not in the barrio where they lived. As their shoe-shine boxes were too heavy for them to carry, these boys, rented a nail on a wall (usually in a shop), where they could hang their boxes for the night. To them, that nail on the wall represented 'exploitation.' The 'nail on the wall' photograph spurred widespread discussions in the Peruvian barrio about other forms of institutionalized exploitation, including ways to overcome them.

The present article analyzes the role of visuals – especially photographs and videos — in participatory communication action and research. The main tenets of participatory communication, including the dialogic pedagogical processes espoused by Paulo Freire, are presented. Various examples are provided of participatory action and research conducted through photography and video. We conclude by discussing the potential and caveats associated with this visual approach to participatory communication.

Participatory Communication

The concept of participation is not new. Long before participation was purposefully advocated for social change, people had formed collectivities in order to farm, defend, and even destroy (Singhal, 2001). However, the discourse of participatory communication is rela-

tively new. It gathered momentum in the 1970s, as discontent mounted with top-down and trickle-down communication approaches to social change (Jacobson, 1993; Servaes, Jacobson, & White, 1996; Uphoff, 1985). *Participatory communication* is defined as a dynamic, interactional, and transformative process of dialogue between people, groups, and institutions that enables people, both individually and collectively, to realize their full potential and be engaged in their own welfare (Singhal, 2001). All participation is communication-driven, but all communication is not participatory (White & Nair, 1999). Gumucio Dagron (2001) provided a useful typology to distinguish participatory communication from other communication strategies for social change (Table 1).

Table 1

Participatory Versus Non-Participatory Communication Strategies

Participatory Communication Strategies	Versus	Non-Participatory Communication Strategies
Horizontal lateral communication	Versus	Vertical top-down between participants communication from senders to receivers
Process of dialogue and democratic participation	Versus	Campaign to mobilize in a short-term without building capacity
Long-term process of sustainable change	Versus	Short-term planning and quick fix solutions
Collective empowerment and decision-making	Versus	Individual behavior change
With community's involvement	Versus	For the community
Specific in content, language, and culture	Versus	Massive and broad-based
People's needs are the focus	Versus	Donors' musts are the focus
Owned by the community	Versus	Access determined by social political and economic factors
Consciousness raising	Versus	Persuasion for short-term

Source: Gumucio Dagron (2001).

While participation comes in all shapes and sizes, participatory communication means working with and by the people, as opposed to working on or working for the people. For many observers, 'participation' and 'participatory' make sense as means. That is, with participation, projects and programs become more humane, more effective, and more sustainable (Chambers, 1983; 1999). For others, participation is an end in itself: A set of desired processes and relationships. Whatever the mix of reasons, a new consensus has put participation at the center stage of social change initiatives during the 1990s. While there may not be a clean way of resolving the issue of participation as means or ends, the compass of participation rests on preserving and enhancing the dignity of the individual. Handouts and other forms of charity are anathema to people's participation. The government of Mexico once decided to pay tribute to Mexican mothers. A proclamation was issued that every mother whose sewing machine was being held by the Monte de Piedad (the national pawnshop of Mexico) should have her machine returned as a gift on Mother's day. There was tremendous jubilation after this announcement. Here was an outright gift without any participation on the part of the recipients. Within a few weeks, however, the same numbers of sewing machines were back in the national pawn shop (Alinsky, 1971).

At the risk of oversimplifying, one may contend that there are two major, but interrelated, approaches to participatory communication (Servaes, 1999). The first approach centers on the dialogic pedagogy of the noted Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. The second approach, often broadly labeled as the participatory community media approach, or the alternative communication approach, centers on the ideas of access, participation, self-determination, and self-management, sharpened during the UNESCO New World Information Order debates of the 1970s. While both sets of participative approaches share several commonalties, their arenas of communicative application have been somewhat distinct. For instance, the Freirean theory of dialogic communication is based more on interpersonal and group dialogue in a community setting, and hence, has found more application in the practice of community development, literacy education, participation, and transformation. The participatory commu-

nity media approach focused on issues of public and community access to appropriate media, participation of people in message design and media production, and self-management of communication enterprises. Its applications are thus more in community radio and television, street theater and folk media, participatory video, and community informatics, Internet, and telecenters.

Paulo Freire's Dialogic Pedagogy

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationist, in his classic book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) argued that most political, educational, and communication interventions fail because they are designed by technocrats based on their personal views of reality. They seldom take into account the perspectives of those to whom these programs are directed.

Freire's most important career lesson came in the early 1950s when he was in charge of establishing adult literacy programs in poverty-stricken Northeastern Brazil. During an introductory seminar for illiterate and semi-illiterate adults, a wage labourer, who had listened to Freire's presentation on the benefits of learning to read and write, challenged Freire to understand the 'world' in which members of the audience were living. Speaking in the local vernacular, the illiterate labourer painted a highly evocative word-picture of the grinding poverty that he and his family endured, of his inability to speak like educated people, and daily struggles with domination and exploitation.

The labourer's moving story, told in his own words, influenced Freire's ideas about what education should and should not be. He realized that an educator's greatest challenge was to understand, appreciate, and respect the knowledge of people's lived experience as expressed in their vernacular. He also realized that politics and pedagogy were inseparable. With experimentation and experience, Freire's pedagogical methods incorporated ideas on critical reflection, dialogue and participation, autonomy, democracy, problematization, and the crucial connection between theory and practice (Freire, 1970). Freire's empowering approach was deemed dangerous politically by Brazil's rightwing military regime, which seized control in 1964, and

he was exiled for over two decades before returning to São Paulo in the mid-1980s to serve as Secretary of Education for the city of São Paulo.

Freire's dialogic pedagogy emphasized the role of 'teacher as learner' and the 'learner as teacher,' with each learning from the other in a mutually transformative process (Freire, 1970). The role of the outside facilitator is one of working with, and not for, the oppressed to organize them in their incessant struggle to regain their humanity (Singhal, 2001). True participation, according to Freire, does not involve a subject-object relationship, but rather a subject-subject relationship.

In Freirean pedagogy, there is no room for teaching 'two plus two equals four'. Such rote pedagogy, according to Freire, is dehumanizing as it views learners as empty receptacles to be 'filled' with expert knowledge. Freire criticized this 'banking' mode of education, in which 'deposits' are made by experts. The scope of action allowed students (or intended beneficiaries) 'extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits' (Freire, 1970, p. 58). Instead, Freire advocated problem-posing as a means to re-present to people what they know and think, not as a lecture, but as an involving problem. So a lesson on 'two plus two' might proceed in the following dialogic manner (Singhal, 2001):

Teacher: How many chickens do you have?
Poor farmer: Two.
Teacher: How many chickens does your neighbor have?
Poor farmer: Two.
Teacher: How many chickens does the landlord have?
Poor farmer: Oh, hundreds!
Teacher: *Why* does he have hundreds, and you have only two?

So goes the dialogic conversation that over time stimulates a process of critical reflection and awareness ('conscientization') on the part of the poor farmer, creating possibilities of reflective action that did not exist before. Freire emphasized that the themes underlying dialogic pedagogy should resonate with people's experiences and issues of salience to them, as opposed to well-meaning but alienating rhetoric (Freire, 1970). Once the oppressed, both individually and collec-

tively, begin to critically reflect on their social situation, possibilities arise for them to break the 'culture of silence' through the articulation of discontent and action.

The Role of Visuals in Participatory Action and Research

For several decades, scholars and practitioners of visual sociology, visual anthropology, and visual communication have had an interest in visual documentation and activism. Sociologists and anthropologists have primarily used photographs to document social realities, looking at local communities as 'objects' of study. For instance, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's 1942 book, *Balinese Character*, included 759 photographs to document Balinese life. The cultural meanings of the photographs were explained in the text. Documentary photographers and filmmakers have visually documented drugs and drug culture (Clark, 1971), the U.S. civil rights movement (Hansberry, 1964), the anti-Vietnam War movement (Kerry, 1971), and the AIDS crisis, raising public awareness of these social issues.

In contrast to the primary use of visuals for documentation, as done mostly by visual sociologists and anthropologists, the relationship between the researcher and the subject is more dialogic, when employing the technique of photo-elicitation. In a typical photo-elicitation interview, a discussion is stimulated and guided by images (Collier, 1967). While the researcher takes pictures of the subject's world, it is the individual pictured (or an individual from the pictured world) who interprets the images, creating a 'listening' opportunity for the researcher.

However, visuals become truly participatory, at least in the Freirean sense, when the subjects play the main role in the making of the visuals, and interpreting them for a researcher, policymaker, or concerned citizen. Consider the following examples of (1) participatory photography and (2) participatory video, as illustrations.

Participatory Photography

Known variously as 'photo voice,' 'talking pictures,' or 'visual

voices,' this technique of participatory photography puts the camera in the hands of the people, who are encouraged to document and co-share their own reality through photos (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996). The process of taking a photograph provides an opportunity to develop a story that was previously rejected, silenced, or overlooked. Further, the photograph's narrative becomes a participatory site for wider storytelling, spurring community members to further reflect, discuss, and analyze the issues that confront them (Lykes, 1997).

Inspired by this Freirean technique, eight disposable cameras were handed out (under the guidance of one of the present authors) in 2002 to the listeners of *Taru*, a popular radio program in India. The purpose was to gauge the influence of *Taru* on audience members in certain villages of Bihar, India. As opposed to asking subjects questions, and thereby constraining the nature and scope of their word responses, they were asked to capture *Taru's* influence on them (or their community) through the language of images (Singhal, Sharma, Papa, & Witte, 2003).

Our invitation to *Taru* listeners—to 'shoot back' (in images) the influence of the radio serial in their lives—yielded 200 photographs. Here we describe a photo from Vandana's camera, a 16-year old young listener of *Taru* in Kamtaul Village of Bihar State. The photo shows Vandana (she asked her cousin to take this picture) standing next to a young man of her age (about 17-years-old). When Vandana was asked what the picture signified, she said: 'This is my boyfriend, a boy who is a friend. He studies in my high school and we attend the same coaching class. I feel comfortable talking to him and sharing my thoughts with him. I am not shy and timid like other girls of Village Kamtaul, who feel nervous talking to boys. If Taru and Shashikant [the main protagonists in the serial] can be good friends, why can't we?' In the picture, Vandana is donning jeans and a shirt, an outfit that conservative villagers regard as inappropriate. Also, perhaps for the first time in the history of Kamtaul Village, a young woman invited a young man to stand beside her and pose for a photograph (Singhal, Sharma, Papa, & Witte, 2003). Further, Vandana was bold enough to share the picture with her parents and other family elders.

While she credited this self-confidence in part to her listening of *Taru*, Vandana noted that the process of picture-taking and reflecting on the pictures, also helped to develop a new sense of self-respect. After all, Vandana had handled a camera for the first time in her life.

Developing skills and self-esteem among children is the purpose of another participatory photography project called Fotokids in Guatemala (Gonzalez, 2003). Founded in 1991 by Nancy McGirr, an American photojournalist, underprivileged Guatemalan children learn camera skills to shoot pictures, and to articulate their viewpoint through photos to community members. The work of Fotokids, which has since expanded to neighboring Honduras, has been exhibited in Britain, Germany, and Spain, and featured in promotional campaigns for children's rights. Several 'Fotokids' are presently studying art, photography, and journalism, having found an empowering way to express themselves.

Another notable example of participatory photography from Guatemala is PhotoVoice, a project of the Association of Maya Ixil Women, who live in the highlands of Guatemala. PhotoVoice has helped local Mayan communities to recover stories of its three-decade long internal war, reflect upon its debilitating effects, and rebuild community (Lykes, 1997). Through photography, indigenous Mayan women developed a public record of their lives. PhotoVoice was inspired by the action-based participatory photography project conducted by rural Chinese women in Yunnan province (a photo book called *Visual Voices: 100 photographs of Village China by the Women of Yunnan Province*, 1995, was compiled).

In sum, by placing cameras in the hands of people, a facilitator or researcher can gain insights into people's lived experiences, which were previously overlooked, rejected, or silenced. The photograph's narrative becomes a participatory site for wider storytelling, community discussion, and action.

Participatory Video

The late Martha Stuart strongly believed in the potential of participatory video for purposes of social change and, in several respects,

her work exemplifies the principles of dialogic pedagogy espoused by Paulo Freire. Stuart, an American who died in 1985, produced television and radio programs in the U.S. during the 1950s. In the late 1960s, when she began producing documentary programs using video technology, she recognized the development potential of small-video format due to its flexibility and portability compared to more traditional broadcast media.

Martha Stuart's organization, Communication for Change (C4C), has helped establish participatory video initiatives in India, Bangladesh, Mali, Nigeria, and several other countries. Here we discuss the case of (1) Video SEWA in India, and (2) Proshika's Participatory Video Programme (PVP) in Bangladesh, both initiated in cooperation with C4C.

Video SEWA

SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) is a union of more than 100,000 members, headquartered in Ahmedabad, India. SEWA organizes the poorest and the most vulnerable segments of Indian society–women, who are self-employed or work in the informal sector (Rose, 1992). SEWA has a full-time participatory video unit, established in the early 1980s with the help of Martha Stuart's organization. Participatory videos, created by Video SEWA, give voice to muted women's issues, bringing them to the attention of policy-makers and the public. Additionally, SEWA's videos reach tens of thousands of its members for multiple purposes of teaching, organizing, and inspiring.

What can participatory video do for poor women? Consider the case of the vegetable vendors of Manekchowk, a lower-middle class area in Ahmedabad. For three generations, women sold vegetables on the sidewalks of the Manekchowk market. With the increasing growth of Ahmedabad city, these vegetable vendors lost their customary place due to increased automobile traffic, the construction of new parking lots, and zealous efforts of the local police. The municipal authorities of Ahmedabad considered the women vegetable vendors to be a traffic obstruction and legal action was taken against them in 1985. The vegetable-sellers' illegality provided the local police with an opportunity to demand bribes and to harass these women in various ways.

In response to this threat, the vegetable vendors were organized by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of Ahmedabad, who filed a legal suit with the Indian Supreme Court to protest the municipal action. Under a Supreme Court order, the municipal government of Ahmedabad was forced to provide an alternative space for the vendors in Manekchowk. SEWA videotaped a meeting held to inform the vegetable vendors of the municipality's proposal for an alternative space for them.

The municipal proposal met varied reactions. Some women were skeptical about the honesty of the municipal authorities. Others felt that the proposal should have been made earlier. Some felt that SEWA would face strong political pressures if they accepted the municipality's proposal. Other women felt that no price was too high if they could escape police harassment. The women of the Manekchowk market showed emotion, enthusiasm, and rational logic as they discussed their problem and various solutions. The video camera captured these moods through the words and faces of the women making decisions about their lives and work.

The next morning, the General Secretary of SEWA, Ela Bhatt, invited the Municipal Commissioner to watch the videotape. He viewed the agitated faces of the women and better understood their fear of the police, their distrust of the municipality, and their sense of solidarity. He empathized with the women of Manekchowk and their problems. As a result, the proposal for an alternative space for the vegetable-sellers was dropped.

Participatory video helps SEWA women reach policy-makers, politicians, bureaucrats, who seldom come into direct contact with the poor people whose lives they govern. As Lila Datania of video SEWA (quoted in Rose, 1992, p. 108) stated: 'We can make complaints for years about slum conditions, but no one hears. When we make videos about these problems, though, things happen. For years we told the municipal authorities about the filth of our open trenches, but no one came to see. They do not like to walk in stinky places. Finally, they saw how bad it is when we made a video and showed it to them. Then they got worried because we had recorded it on film and said all these things about them ignoring the problem. They are afraid the

film will be seen elsewhere and they will be shown lacking, so they took action to fix the problem.'

Proshika's Participatory Video Programme

Proshika, is a large non-governmental organization with operations in several thousand Bangladeshi villages. Proshika launched its Participatory Video Programme (PVP) in 1991 with the help of Martha Stuart's C4C. PVP members were trained in producing video documentaries about their pressing problems, social issues, and local activities (Table 2). Over 800 videos have been produced by PVP to date, and shown in several thousand villages of Bangladesh. One video, 'Life Struggle of Aleya,' made by Shahnaz, a poor woman from a remote village in Bangladesh, won the Women in Development Video Award Competition organized by the British Council, London. In the video, Shahnaz documented the life struggle of her neighbour Aleya, who despite being a poor, illiterate single parent manages to educate her daughter. Through the screening of this PVP video, Shahnaz educated thousands of her peers about how poor women could changes their lot in life.

Table 2

The Goals of Proshika's Participatory Video Programme

1. To awaken people's human and ethical values;
2. To ensure the participation of poor villagers and to value their thoughts and beliefs;
3. To disprove the popular belief that poor villagers cannot use sophisticated technology and to create skill among these target people;
4. To project the view points of the villagers about social issues and to ensure their participation;
5. To point out the reasons the poor are deprived and robbed out of power;
6. To ensure that participatory video remains true to life rather than being created as an entertainment;
7. To uphold the views of the people who are alienated by the media;
8. To show that grassroots people are capable of expressing their feelings and their problems;
9. to raise people's consciousness by exchanging video programs among people of various regions;
10. To show the processes from which people conquer poverty and to show the causes of poverty.

Source: www.c4c.org/proshika.html

Akin to Video SEWA, PVP members use participatory video to confront social injustices, especially the oppression against women. When an atrocity occurs, PVP members rush to the scene and videotape the event; the event can then not be denied in court, nor can a false witness be presented. Once, the PVP team interviewed the poor people whose roadside plantation was destroyed when the local road was widened. The videotape, once played in court, helped secure compensation for the poor. PVP teams also film election campaigns of political leaders, instilling accountability and responsibility. Politicians who 'make' promises on videotape now fear being confronted when they 'break' one. Human rights activists also use PVP videos to sharpen their case against social injustices.

PVP participants are especially adept in organizing video playback events and in lead discussions based on the content. When cholera broke out in a community, a PVP team videotaped the flies that sat on uncovered food in restaurants and on roadside vending carts. This videotape, when played by the PVP team among community members, raised awareness about food hygiene, and also energized local activists to pressure the restaurant owners to cover the exposed food, and to keep their premises clean. Proshika has learned that the process of video screening invariably leads to animated community discussion, followed by decision-making and public action. The video catalyzes the public discourse, and builds community through collective actions. .

PVP's participatory processes engender a sense of dignity among members of the local community. Community members (such as Shahnaz, the documentary film awardee, discussed previously) work as change agents within their own socio-cultural milieu to address local problems. New grassroots leadership is emerging and change initiatives, based on peer-directed videotaped learnings, are sprouting locally. The PVP teams also videotape the indigenous handicraft skills of the local people, using it for imparting skills-based training in remote villages. In this sense, PVP videotapes represent a means of exchanging information, experiences, and 'victories'. Videotapes are routinely exchanged among different village *samitis* (committees).

In sum, by placing the means of video production in the hands of poor, marginalized women, both Proshika's Participatory Video Programme and Video SEWA have become strident voices against social injustice and oppression. They have helped women in sharing common experiences across geographical boundaries, spurring community discussions, and public action. They have challenged civil society organizations, especially public service departments and the judiciary, to become more accountable and responsive.

Conclusions

In taking stock of the sociology of visuals – whether in the form of photos or as video – it is not difficult to discern the obvious conclusion: Almost all photos and videos are taken by 'the powerful, the established, the male, the colonizer' to 'portray the less powerful, less established, female, and colonized' (Harper, 1994, p. 408). In the present article, we advocate handing over the means of visual production to the oppressed, the silent, and the muted.

When the oppressed 'subjects' play the main role in framing and creating visuals, and subsequently share them with a peer, a researcher, or a policy-maker, then only, in the true Freirean sense, can there be a subject-subject relationship — that is, the teacher as learner, and the learner as teacher. Then only, the role of the outside facilitator is one of working with and not for the oppressed, as they struggle to regain their humanity. Then only, is participatory action and research truly emancipatory.

While recognizing that visuals allow the 'oppressed' to make statements that are not possible by words, we should also remember that all photographs, or video clips, are socially and technically constructed (Harper, 1994). Photography and videography is by its very nature more 'active' and 'intrusive' than simple observing; so the visual act, by itself, shapes and changes what is being documented. In essence, despite the dictum—'seeing is believing', visual frames are a reflection of the photographer's point-of-view, biases, and knowledge. They are no less and no more.

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Endnotes

1 This section draws upon Singhal (2003).

2 Along with colleagues Yogita Sharma and Devendra Sharma of Ohio university, author Singhal is carrying out an in-depth study of these participatory visual responses.

3 Previously known as Martha Stuart Communications and Village Video Network (VVN).

4 This case draws upon Singhal and Rogers (1989).

5 Author Devi is an employee of Proshika and this section draws upon her personal knowledge of PVP and internal Proshika publications (see also www.c4c.org/proshika.html).

Arvind Singhal is Professor and Presidential Research Scholar in the School of Communication Studies, Ohio University, Ohio.

Kanta Devi earned her MA degree in Communication and Development Studies from Ohio University in 2003 while on leave from Proshika, a grassroot based NGO in Bangladesh.